World Chronicle

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SMALL ISLAND STATES

When we think about small islands, we generally think about paradise on earth. These islands are among the world's most beautiful places. And yet, they are in real danger. Small islands are threatened by climate change, natural disasters and human poverty. Recently, the United Nations held a special session of its General Assembly to discuss the issues affecting small island states. In this episode of **World Chronicle**, Ambassador Tuiloma Neroni Slade, Chairman of the Alliance of Small Island States and Samoa's Representative to the United Nations, discusses some of the pressing problems affecting small island states around the world.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

More than ever, small island nations are vulnerable. They are especially vulnerable to global problems such as climate change and they face many local issues including pollution, population pressure and natural resource management. Small islands have, therefore, embarked on a number of programmes to promote sustainable development. But despite good intentions, because resources are limited, the ability of the small islands to implement these programmes often falls short. Recently the United Nations held a special session of its General Assembly in New York to discuss the issues affecting these small island states.

Our guest today is an expert on small island states. He is Ambassador Tuiloma Neroni Slade, Chairman of the Alliance of Small Island States, AOSIS, and Samoa's Representative to the United Nations. Joining me to talk with Ambassador Slade are Judy Lessing of *Radio New Zealand* and Minh Vo of the *Christian Science Monitor*.

Ambassador Slade, welcome to **World Chronicle.**

SLADE: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador, we spoke about good intentions and your intentions no doubt were to expose the problem to the widest possible audience, but unfortunately unless I missed it, it seems that many in the media were not exactly grabbed by the - what should have been a headline catching phrase, 'trouble in paradise'. Is this another of those problems that is extremely serious but people are tending to ignore?

SLADE: Well I suppose that is true to some extent, but there is - there are a couple of points if I may - that I need to make first. One is that the programme of action that we're speaking about is a global programme. It's a United Nations programme of action. It's a programme that is concerned with the sustainable development of small island developing states. But one that clearly cannot be undertaken in the global context by those countries alone but requires the involvement - the full engagement and the implementation, the assistance of the International Community as a whole. That is why we had a special session of the General Assembly. So this was a session of 188 Member States of the United Nations to deal again I say, with a United Nations programme. Yes, I would need to say if the

assessment - is that there was not a great deal of media publicity or attention to the special session in New York - allow me to say that we'd like also to feel that on the other hand, there was sufficient mention of it in our own countries and in our own regions. And in many respects, that is far more important.

LITTLEJOHNS: But what is the most serious problem that you might say is common to all the developing island states?

SLADE: The two problems that are immediate challenges are environmental problems and problems that are associated with globalization, particularly trade at the moment. Now environmental problems, one especially serious one is the climate change that you've referred to. But there are other problems affecting the loss of biodiversity and so on. The problems relating to the depredation of the marine area and the resources of the marine area. Bear in mind that we are oceanic - small island states are oceanic countries. They are custodians of very, very large areas of the world's oceans and seas.

LITTLEJOHNS: How much can you do without outside assistance?

SLADE: Exactly the point. As I've said before, this is the - when you're speaking about the sustainable development of these countries, you are talking also about their responsibility in respect of the marine area. So therefore clearly, they need - - all countries must cooperate not only about the use of the natural resources of the oceans, but also in looking after them. Tending to the health of the fishes as well as to the health of the coral. But it means also that you cannot allow these small island states whose vulnerabilities are clear and have been acknowledged internationally, to confront major global problems like climate change. Problems that have been created historically by the evolution of most known society and problems not of their own making. And it is not right for a host of reasons, including the equity and moral consideration, to allow these countries – to expect these countries to fend alone against such a problem. There is - and perhaps just a reminder, one of the Secretary-General has reminded the General Assembly in the recent session of the General Assembly, that the two major challenges really for the next century are warfare and natural disasters. And it's how we, the International Community, will seek to cope with these problems that will be the test of the international mettle. Now it is a fact that small island states are particularly vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters including storms, hurricanes, and so on.

LESSING: Now you mentioned natural disasters, Ambassador, but could we look at natural disasters as increasing more frequently because of what people are doing to the earth and therefore because you're so small, and because a great storm can wipe out an entire atoll, or come close to it, that you feel that this perhaps is your number one problem?

SLADE: Absolutely. Yes, it's - and it's severe because the statistics are obvious. Two years - last year, 1998 is recognized as the worst ever weather-related year in terms of natural disasters. We know that in the 1990s, it's three times as worse than in the 1960s in the frequency and the - and the ferocity of these events. And it is our countries that are particularly exposed and vulnerable to this. Now I - one is aware, sufficiently aware of the problem to acknowledge immediately that there is no certainty - I cannot prove and none of our people can prove -- that these effects of storms and so on are due to the cause of climate change. But if you ask me what the perception of the ordinary citizen in my country and other small island states, I can assure you that they're related in their ordinary lives and experience, to the obvious changes in the global climate system.

LESSING: Are you losing land because of the storms?

SLADE: Yes. Many small island states are suffering foreshore depredation. They're losing their foreshores. Incidentally these are the most attractive areas for their major tourism business. But many of our communities and islands live naturally in the small coastal areas that are available. So they're affecting their daily lives. We are losing - there are reports of islets being submerged in Tuvalu and Kiribati in the South Pacific.

VO: What have you done to reverse the erosion of land in these small islands? Is there anything that can be done soon and without much funding from donor countries, considering that official development assistance has decreased over the years?

SLADE: It's physically impossible in large measure to deal - these of course are erosions that are being caused by higher sea level rise or increased storm surges and due to hurricanes and the force of the winds and the tides and so on. And clearly, it's physically impossible to wall, put walls, retaining walls or protective walls around all island systems. But on the other hand, it's absolutely necessary to do it. Particularly in, where the capitals or where infrastructural areas are - around airports and so on. It's just simply necessary to do that - at huge costs.

VO: Right. And so at huge cost is, are the small islands able to take in these costs by themselves or do they require the help of the industrialized nations?

SLADE: It's absolutely essential to have outside help. We know for instance from figures undertaken by studies by international scientific groups that a figure well beyond one billion dollar is required just to set up protective walling in the Caribbean area. Now that sort of figure is well beyond the combined GDP of all the countries, small island states in the Caribbean. But as I say because of the low lying nature of these islands, there is some protective measure, no matter how expensive, it's absolutely essential to build them. And many countries, including my own, we have - we require, absolutely no doubt about that, require international assistance. And not only in terms of the money, but the knowhow in building sea walls.

LESSING: But building a sea wall, if you're a tourist wanting to go to Samoa, the Cook islands or somewhere in tne Caribbean, looking at the sea wall isn't going to be much of a come on. And yet tourism is looked upon as a very important income producing part of your economies. Is that a two edged sword? Are there pluses and minuses with tourism?

SLADE: Oh, yes. The - increasingly very large numbers of island states have to accept tourism as the only other viable source of development. It is obviously a global industry. It's a huge money making industry. But it's essentially a very invasive activity – tourism. There are many countries like my own which is highly traditional. One - therefore governments need to be careful and to have in mind the impact, the social impact on cultural and - culture and traditions of the land. But I think the question of management is also brought to the fore. So we need expertise, we need experience and we need again, the collaboration, the sensible collaboration of tour operators and the International Community.

LITTLEJOHNS: Are you getting that?

SLADE: I believe we're getting there. I think there are discussions, there are meetings. The UNEP, the United Nations Environment Programme, is undertaking very careful planning activities, assisting our countries, assisting the International Community in the development, the sensible development of this industry. In terms of policy, they are our countries. Tourists are our visitors. The policies must come within our countries. They must not be enforced. And these are some of the rules that we would like to examine in the development of tourism.

LITTLEJOHNS: But runaway development, particularly in some of the more salubrious parts of southern Europe has had a terrible effect on the coastlines – building hotels and golf courses and so on. Are you, are your governments active in preventing a repetition of that kind of thing?

SLADE: Well let's, let's say the small islands are exposed to mismanagement so that we - it is necessary to guard against these things. One - it's already evident that the problems that come with unsustainable tourism and tourism practices leaves us with waste. We cannot deal with the problem of waste. Unsustainable tourism means that population growth. It means that hordes of our populations are drawn into the urban areas. It creates problems, social problems. So these things all must be looked at very, very carefully I think.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Ambassador Tuiloma Neroni Slade, Chairman of the Alliance of Small Island States, AOSIS and Samoa's representative to the United Nations.

VO: Well given the strength that tourism presents on the environment of the small islands that you just mentioned earlier, is there any kind of restructuring of the economy that islands in the CAribbean for example can do? Can they shift to other industries in order to raise their GDP - and at the same time mimimize the dangers to their environment?

SLADE: Yes, I think there is need to diversify which is I think essentially I think the essence, the nature of the question. We obviously cannot rely entirely on tourism. There could be quite serious environmental impacts. The question of fresh water for instance. Now many, many tourism facilities usually involves a swimming pool and an immense amount of fresh water which is naturally a restricted commodity in any small island. The question of golf courses involves fertilizer which pollutes not only the land but eventually the marine area. So yes, it invites a host of problems. Good management, sensible cooperation amongst ourselves and outsiders, and a good mix - diversification of effort and industry, I think.

LESSING: If I could just run off from what Minh was asking, you said earlier when Michael was talking at the beginning of this program, about globalization being a major focus and a major problem, difficulty for small islands. If you diversify and go to some more agricultural products - aren't you in a really difficult position when it comes to selling those products?

SLADE: Well this is - we - as small islands, we do have the serious constraints of choices. Very few real options are available for our countries. If you look at the Caribbean, the Pacific, Indian Ocean, these are the regions of small island states. Many of them have to rely on specialist crops in the agriculture field. It could be sugar cane, could be bananas, some fish. Otherwise you really need to go into some manufacturing - and many are going into textiles, some light industrial activity. And this is the problem, there is not a great deal that you could rely on for trading. And then even if you had a strong economy, you need to be able to compete and compete reasonably well in the international marketplace. And again, this is a problem because so many of these small islands are located in mid ocean. They are isolated from national markets. Trunk line transportation systems are irregular or expensive. And they would - many of them would need to rely on air transportation for instance.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Slade, is there a size limit for membership in your group? For example Madagascar is not exactly a small island. But I presume it's a member of your group. And of course all as you've explained have to be developing countries.

SLADE: Yes. This is an alliance of small island developing states. They're drawn from all regions of the world. I've indicated three already. But we also have members from the Mediterranean. For instance Malta, Cypress. We have countries from the Atlantic for instance South China seas -

LITTLEJOHNS: Bermuda -

SLADE: Yes, Virgin islands. These are countries which are not members of the United Nations but we cooperate with them as observers. South China Seas, Singapore. So we range from the very small, Tuvalu, Naru in the Pacific are very tiny island states, to the larger ones like Cuba, Papua, New Guinea, Jamaica, these are the large islands.

LITTLEJOHNS: Madagascar.

SLADE: Not yet. Although we cooperate with Madagascar on many of our activities.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is that because Madagascar's too big?

SLADE: No, no, it's - it, I - it's - we're ready to - we're open - we're not a closed door alliance. So - we await.

LITTLEJOHNS: You have about 40 members I believe. What is the total population?

SLADE: Some 55-60 million off the global count. We have an alliance of 43 island states drawn from these regions that I have mentioned, 35 of them are Member States of the United Nations which means almost 19 percent of the total membership of the United Nations and over 26 percent of developing countries – not an insignificant number in terms of their interest and concerns as Member States and may I say in terms of their voting power.

VO: I'd like to get back to the question of development assistance. Which has been decreasing steadily over the past decade. And you are competing not just with other small islands for funds, but also with other developing countries in Africa and Asia and Latin America. Given this trend in decreased ODA, is there a - are you resigned to this trend or is there something you can do to reverse this trend?

SLADE: Well, it's a global trend. I think we have to take our own place alongside many other developing countries who have voiced their concern. We know the decrease in official development assistance which peaked in 1994, I believe. And since then has moved on to a fairly low point by 1997. And may I say that 1994 is a rather significant year because that of course was the year Barbados program was established. Which means that immediately after the Barbados program of action which had pledged to, amongst other things - an increase or a constant supply of official development assistance, instead it started going down almost immediately. Now, what can we do about it? I think there is a generally acknowledged fatigue, ODA fatigue. There's not a great deal. What we have done in the special session is to voice our concern about these problems and not only, and to give the reasons why we must be assured of some funding assistance. But clearly we cannot leave the problem there of decreasing ODA and not doing anything about it. We are coping with this in terms of our own building of our own strengths, regional cooperation. For instance because we're too small, we can better look after ourselves by acting together as the Caribbean region or the South Pacific region - or developing regional programs. One other aspect of the official development assistance that we noticed and we brought and we brought to the attention of the International Community, because we're so small in terms of market destinations - we are in fact attracting very little of this financial, direct financial investments. So the FDI, that is not coming our way. And that's - perhaps understandable enough that this will go more to the larger economies. But it does leave us in a very rather serious dilemma.

LITTLEJOHNS: FDI, foreign direct investment. ODA, overseas development assistance.

SLADE: Thank you Mr. Chairman, yes.

LESSING: I was going to ask you more about growing your way out of some of these economic problems because you talked about trade earlier and the various barriers to diversification. And globalization as a problem. How can you in fact, grow your way out without some kind of meeting point and preferences by the countries which can import the things you export?

SLADE: Well this is our own contention. Bear in mind also that within the large trading bloc of the European Union, for many years now, small island states have enjoyed the benefits of this association through the African, Caribbean and Pacific association with the European Union as a trading bloc. That arrangement allowed us differential treatment for an axis of our - some of our commodities, sugar, bananas for instance to the European market. Now these have been a very severe erosion of these preferential treatment now. And we saw the problem with the banana in the Caribbean. Now we cannot just have the gate dropped on us on these things. I think there ought to - in fairness, there ought to be some time to allow us to find alternative means if within the World Trade organization regime of today, it means that we've got to go to the open market like everybody else. And that is why we insist or we are asking for some special or differential treatment.

LESSING: So in a sense, if you have to go straight to an open market system, it's rather like being pushed off a cliff.

SLADE: Well, it - certainly it puts us rather in a difficult situation.

VO: Does that make the World Trade organization a problem for small islands?

SLADE: No, I think we probably do recognize that it is not only, in today's terms it's not only a challenge but it's probably also a field of opportunities. And I think we cannot turn our backs to these opportunities. But what we're saying is at this point, we are not yet strong enough - diversified enough, prepared enough to deal with the opportunities. But we must - you see the whole thing about the - this program of action for small island states - it's aimed at strengthening our resolve to be self reliant, ultimately. And that's a good test. I think we must be confident enough of our own strength so at some point in the future, we will have that, enjoy that self reliance.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Slade, we have only a little over a minute left but could you tell me, to what extent are the members of your group pulling together, speaking with a single voice. And how much sort of inside squabbling is there. Perhaps not at all. But could you tell us a bit about it.

SLADE: Well as you can imagine, we are a naturally disparate group politically, economically, geographically if you like. But what we do have in common are shared development experiences and disadvantages and vulnerabilities. Therefore as - to be heard in the International Community, we have had to lay down our natural differences to speak with one voice - as united as we can. By combining in this alliance that we've been talking about, it gives us the advantages that only one country or a few countries alone cannot have.

LITTLEJOHNS: So there's not an excess of competitiveness in your group.

SLADE: Not on this issue.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Slade, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of World Chronicle. Our guest has been Ambassador Tuiloma Neroni Slade, Chairman of the Alliance of Small Island States, AOSIS and Samoa's Representative to the United Nations. Also Ambassador to the United States. He was interviewed by Judy Lessing of *Radio New Zealand* and Minh Vo of *The Christian Science Monitor*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**

ANNOUNCER: Transcripts of the program may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped self addressed envelope to World Chronicle, United Nations, Room S-827, New York New York 10017. World Chronicle is broadcast worldwide and features guests whose work is concerned with major global issues. This program is a public affairs presentation of this station, from United Nations Radio and Television.